

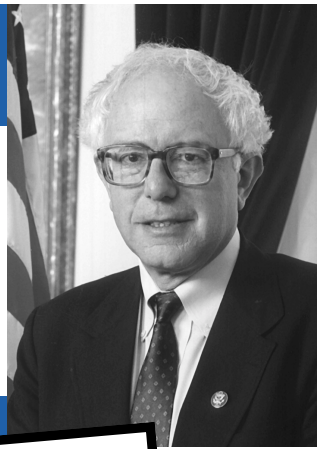


U.S. Representative

Bernie Sanders

Focus on Senior Citizens' Issues

Spring 2001



Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Vermont Senior;

I am writing to update you on some issues of vital importance to seniors, and to invite you to a Congressional Town Meeting on Senior Citizen issues. (See page 4 to find out when a Town Meeting is scheduled near you). Budgetary decisions are now being made in Washington that could significantly affect you and seniors throughout the country. Attending one of these Town Meetings will give you a chance to hear more about these matters, ask questions and voice your opinions. Some of the topics that we will discuss include:

TAX POLICY: Congress is now debating the President's proposal for \$1.6 trillion in tax breaks – 43 percent of which would go to the wealthiest 1 percent. I believe that the President's tax-break proposal is too large and very unfair. Instead of providing huge tax breaks to millionaires, more funding should be set aside to extend and strengthen Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid and veterans' needs – among other neglected areas.

SOCIAL SECURITY: Some in the Congress want to partially privatize Social Security. I strongly disagree. Social Security is probably the most successful anti-poverty program in the history of our nation. In the 65 years since it's creation, not one American eligible for Social Security has failed to receive his/her benefit. In my view, we should focus on extending the life of Social Security and increasing the cost-of-living adjustment that seniors receive – not privatizing it.

PRESCRIPTION DRUGS: Americans pay, by far, the highest prescription drug prices in the world. On average, for every dollar an American pays for a prescription drug the British pay 65 cents, Canadians pay 64 cents, the French pay 57 cents and Italians pay 51 cents - for the same exact drugs. Congress needs to develop the courage to take on the powerful pharmaceutical industry, and pass legislation that will lower the cost of prescription drugs for all and provide a strong prescription drug benefit under Medicare.

HEALTH CARE: As a result of large cuts in Medicare and Medicaid, which I strongly opposed, seniors in nursing homes and hospitals, and those receiving home health care have seen reductions in their quality of health care. Further, it is often very difficult for lower income seniors to find the dental care they need, or to receive preventive health care, hearing aids, dentures, eyeglasses, medical nutrition therapy and other alternative health care practices. In my view, we should significantly increase funding for Medicare and Medicaid, and move toward the day when every American, regardless of income, receives health care as a right of citizenship.

NUTRITION: Too many seniors are not getting adequate nutrition. However, there have been some improvements in this situation. A program that I recently had expanded into Vermont, the Commodity Supplemental Food Program, is now providing free grocery items to 5,000 eligible seniors – and is expanding rapidly. In addition, seniors may be eligible for *cash* to purchase food in the supermarket as a result of changes in the food stamp program. Interested seniors need to learn about these programs. No one should be forced to choose between food and other basic necessities.

If you have any questions or comments on these or any other issue, please do not hesitate to write my office or call us at 1-800-339-9834. We have an excellent staff that has provided help to many Vermont seniors on issues such as Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, housing, nutrition and veterans' needs. Also, please check out our website at bernie.house.gov for information on a wide variety of issues and to contact my office electronically.

Sincerely yours,

Bernie
Bernard Sanders
U.S. Congressman

Seniors Need Affordable Prescription Drugs

As many of you know, I have been working hard to lower the cost of prescription drugs in this country and to make certain that all senior citizens have a prescription drug benefit under Medicare. Last year, I accompanied two groups of Vermont seniors who went across the Canadian border to purchase the medicines they need at lower prices. I wanted to see for myself the absurdity of Americans having to pay as much as ten times more than Canadians for the same exact drug – drugs made by American companies. This year, I am offering the strongest and most comprehensive prescription drug legislation in Congress.

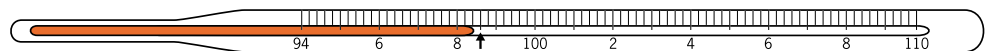
In order to understand the prescription drug crisis, several key points need to be made. First, the pharmaceutical industry is, year after year, one of the most lucrative industries in America. Last year, the top ten drug companies pocketed \$27 billion in profits. Second, the American people pay, by far, the highest prices for prescription drugs in the world. For every dollar we spend for prescription drugs, people in Canada spend on average 64 cents and in Italy they spend 51 cents for the same exact

drug. Third, the pharmaceutical industry spends more money on campaign contributions, political advertising and lobbying than any other industry and has enormous influence over Congress. Fourth, as a result of the outrageously high prices of medicine, millions of senior citizens are suffering and some are even dying because they cannot afford to fill the prescriptions written by their physicians.

To provide a *real* response to the crisis in prescription drugs, my office has introduced new legislation that would provide comprehensive prescription drug coverage to seniors within the Medicare program, and would substantially lower the cost of prescription drugs for *all* Americans. This legislation, called MEDS, would create a voluntary prescription drug benefit within the Medicare program. This benefit would cover 80% of the cost of a person's medication costs and 100% once the senior has paid a maximum of \$2,000 out of pocket in a year. If this legislation passes, no senior in America will ever again have to worry about whether or not they can afford their medicine.



MEDS doesn't just provide Medicare coverage for prescription drugs, it also lowers the price of medicines for *everyone*. It does this by closing the loopholes that the drug companies put in a law passed last year to allow American pharmacists, wholesalers and distributors to purchase FDA-approved drugs at the lowest price sold abroad. By closing these loopholes, Americans would see a 30-50% reduction in the price of prescription drugs without any government cost. Further, the MEDS plan permits Medicare beneficiaries to take advantage of the federal government's bulk-purchasing power and allow them to buy medicine at the same price Medicaid does — which is significantly lower than the price available to an individual consumer.



We're here to help...

If you have any questions or comments on senior citizen concerns or any other issue, please to do not hesitate to write my office, or call us at 1-800-339-9834. We have an excellent staff that has provided help to thousands of Vermonters on such services as Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, nutrition programs, veterans' needs, immigration, housing and many other issues. Also, please check out our website at bernie.house.gov for information on a wide variety of issues and to contact my office electronically.



Protecting Nursing Home Care

The quality of nursing home care is an issue that will eventually affect the majority of us, either directly or through family members or other loved ones. To ensure quality care, we must commit the resources it takes to hire the caring nurses and others to get the job done.

Nationally, we know that nursing home care quality issues and particularly those related to inadequate staffing levels, are serious and widespread. A federal government report last year found a strong relationship between staffing levels and quality of care, indicating that 54 % of nursing homes subject residents to harm due to inadequate staffing. A study released this year by the Institute of Medicine of the National Academy of Sciences also confirmed the need for more staff in nursing homes, calling for the government to require 24-hour registered

nurse coverage and to establish minimum staffing levels for licensed nurses and nursing assistants.

This is not a new issue. Congress has been hearing about low staffing in nursing homes since the 1960's. Unfortunately, there has been little effective Congressional action to improve the situation. As a result, the National Citizens Coalition for Nursing Home Reform has proposed a national minimum number of required nursing hours per resident per day. I strongly support federal legislation setting national standards for nursing home care and staffing. I also support the Vermont Commissioner of Aging and Disabilities' effort to set minimum standards for Vermont as 37 other states have already done. Nursing home residents are some of the most vulnerable of our citizens. It is imperative that we treat them with the care and dignity they deserve.

Social Security: Protection for Generations to Come

If you watch TV or read the newspapers, you've probably heard various politicians state that Social Security is "going broke" or is near "bankruptcy." You may have also heard that the only way to "save" Social Security is through the radical step of "privatization," and having workers invest in the stock market.

The truth of the matter is quite the opposite. Not only is Social Security not going broke but it is, in fact, in strong financial condition. As of this year, the Social Security Trust Fund has a surplus of over \$2.3 trillion dollars and will be able to pay full benefits for every eligible American for the next 37 years - until the year 2038. With minor adjustments in the system Social Security will be able to pay out benefits for the next 75 years. That is not what I would call a system "in crisis."

There is confusion as to what the function of Social Security is. Some see it as an *investment* type program designed to earn as much money as possible. I disagree with that formulation. Social Security was developed as an *insurance* program designed to make certain that

every American would have *guaranteed* retirement benefits. Millions of Americans choose to take the risks involved in investing in the stock market. Some make money, and some lose money. But that's not what Social Security is about.

Social Security is designed to make

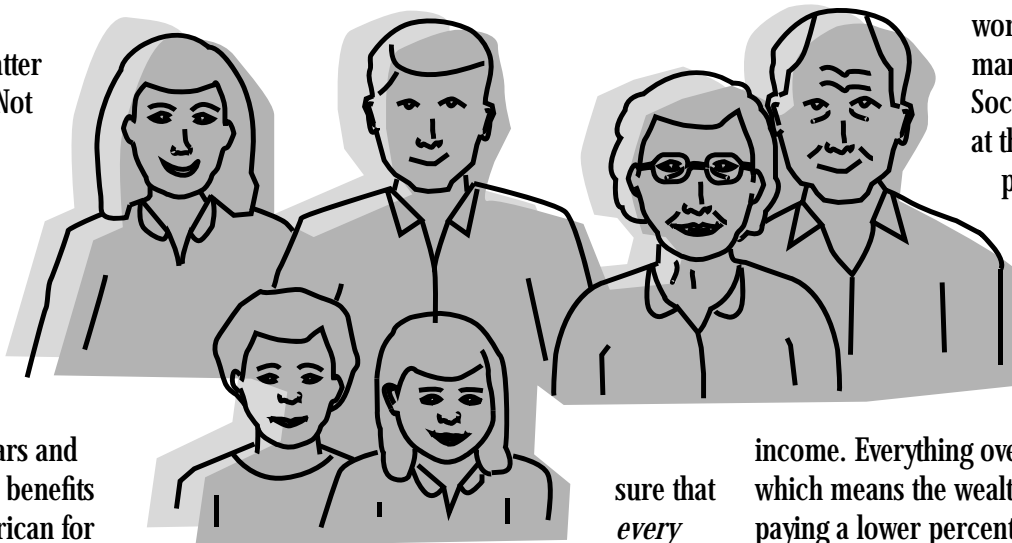
In my view, one of the ways that we can reform Social Security to extend its life is to change the way we fund it. Currently, Social Security is funded in a very regressive manner - middle and lower-income people shoulder a heavier burden than the wealthy. Today, everyone from a minimum wage worker to the richest man in America pays Social Security taxes at the same rate - 6.2 percent. But the law only requires people to pay those taxes on their first \$80,400 of

income. Everything over that is exempt, which means the wealthy are actually paying a lower percentage of their income in Social Security taxes than people making under \$80,400. Removing that ceiling so that everyone makes a fair contribution to the Social Security system, would extend the system for many years beyond the current projections. In fact, by doing so, the tax rate could even be reduced.

Making Social Security COLAs Make Sense

Year after year, Social Security cost-of-living adjustments (COLAs) do not accurately reflect the inflation in the expenses of senior citizens, and the elderly fall economically further and further behind. The reason for this is that the formula the government uses to determine COLAs is based on the *general* level of inflation, which is almost always *lower* than the increase in costs faced by seniors. For example, seniors spend far more than the general public on health care and prescription drugs - costs that are rising far faster than the general rate of inflation.

I have introduced legislation that deals with this unfair situation by establishing a new and separate COLA inflation index for seniors. This will result in higher COLAs and higher Social Security checks.



sure that every eligible

American receives the benefits they are promised *regardless* of the state of the economy or the ups and downs of the stock market. **And for the last 65 years Social Security has kept that promise.** During that period not one eligible American has failed to receive his/her benefit. One of the reasons that Social Security has always been there is that the Social Security surplus is invested in U.S. Treasury Bonds, the safest investment in the world.

Seniors' Nutrition Programs

No senior in America should go hungry, or be forced to cut back on other basic necessities to buy food. That is why I strongly support nutrition programs such as Meals on Wheels, congregate meal sites and the food stamp program. It is also why I recently passed a \$10 million dollar amendment which brought a new nutrition program to the state of Vermont, the Commodity Supplemental Food Program.

The Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP) provides a once-a-month distribution of

free food to lower income seniors. The package of quality food includes products such as pasta, cheese, juice, tuna fish, vegetables and other nutritious food items. So far, over 5,000 Vermonters have joined the program in the short period of time that it has been in existence. It is expected that, within the year, 10,000 seniors from all over the state will be enrolled. For more information about the Commodity Supplemental Food Program and other senior nutrition programs you can call my office at 1-800-339-9834, or the Commodity Supplemental Food Program Hot Line at 1-800-214-4648.



Rep. Bernie Sanders
1 Church Street, Second floor
Burlington, VT 05401-4417
Telephone: 802-862-0697
Toll-free: 800-339-9834
www.house.gov/bernie

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Official Business



M.C.
Pre-Sorted
Standard

In This Issue...

Focus on Senior Citizens' Issues...

Letter from Bernie	Page 1
Seniors Need Affordable Prescription Drugs	Page 2
Protecting Nursing Home Care	Page 2
We're here to help	Page 2
Social Security: Protection for Generations to Come	Page 3
Seniors' Nutrition Programs	Page 3
Veterans' Issues	Page 4
Older Americans Act	Page 4

If you receive more than one copy of this newsletter, we apologize. Please feel free to pass the extra copy along to an interested friend.

This mailing was prepared, published, and mailed at taxpayer expense.

**Come Join Congressman Sanders at One of
His Congressional Town Meetings on Seniors' Issues**

Bernie will be joined by state and local experts on seniors' issue at these meetings.

Friday, April 20

Burlington	10 am	Heineberg Senior Center, 14 Heineberg Rd.
Rutland	2 pm	Godnik Center, 1 Deer St. (corner Woodstock Ave.)

Monday, April 23

White River Jct.	Noon	Bugbee Senior Center, 55 N. Main St.
Woodstock	2 pm	Woodstock Senior Center, 1141 Senior Lane

Friday, April 27

Island Pond	Noon	Island Pond Senior Center (Sunrise Manor), 94 Main St.
St. Johnsbury	2:30 pm	Grace United Methodist Church, 36 Central St.

For more information, call (800) 339-9834.

Veterans' Issues

Many veterans are not fully aware of the benefits to which they are entitled. In the past few years my office has helped hundreds of Vermont veterans receive low cost prescription drugs through the VA health care system. If you are spending more than you can afford on medicine, and want to know how to save money on prescription drugs, you might want to learn more about this important veterans' benefit.

Further, many Vermont veterans do not know about the new VA outpatient health clinics that have opened in Bennington, Rutland and the St. Johnsbury area – meaning that many Vermont veterans do not have to travel to White River Junction for their health care needs. Sam Haskins, who worked as a benefits counselor with the VFW for 14 years, is now the veterans' specialist in my office. For more information on veterans' benefits, please give Sam a ring in my office at 1-800-339-9834.



Older Americans Act

I am proud to have strongly supported the reauthorization of the Older Americans Act (OAA) last year. This program, started by President Johnson, provides basic funding for senior centers, congregate meal sites, Meals-on Wheels, RSVP, adult education, local transportation and for many other senior needs. Programs and services supported by the Act served over 8 million Americans in 1999, 40 percent with incomes below the poverty level.

Unfortunately, funding for the Older Americans Act has not kept pace with the rapid growth in the senior population. Programs designed to help the elderly stay independent have declined by 40 percent since 1980. However, the number of Americans over age 85 is expected to increase 40 percent by the year 2010, representing the fastest growing segment of our population. The OAA plays an important role in Vermont. It provides services vital to the dignity and self-sufficiency of our senior populations. I intend to all that I can to push for a significant increase in funding for this vitally important legislation. For more information regarding these programs, contact the Vermont Senior Helpline at 1-800-642-5119 (voice and TTY).